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Book Reviews

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Review of *Alien Capital: Asian Racialization and the Logic of Settler Colonial Capitalism* by Iyko Day (Duke University Press)

Rachel Kuo

ABSTRACT Iyko Day makes a compelling intervention in discussions of race, capital, and settler colonialism. Her book presents a theorization of the abstract economism of Asian racialization by examining how social differentiation functions as a destructive form of abstraction anchored by settler colonial ideologies of romantic anticapitalism. By engaging with capitalism's abstraction of differentiated gendered and racialized labor in order to create value, Day's project diverges from scholarship arguing that capitalism profits from labor via the production, rather than the abstraction, of racialized difference (Lowe 1996; Roediger 2008). Her book engages a rich multimedia archive and uses principal historical instances of Asian North American cultural production as theoretical texts to examine key racial policies since the 19th century: Chinese railroad labor in the 1880s, anti-Asian immigration restrictions; internment of Japanese civilians during World War II, and the neoliberalization of immigration policy in the late 1960s.

Alien Capital: Asian Racialization and the Logic of Settler Colonial Capitalism.

By Iyko Day. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016, 245 pp. (paperback)

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Iyko Day makes a compelling intervention in discussions of race, capital, and settler colonialism. Her book presents a theorization of the abstract economism of Asian racialization by examining how social differentiation functions as a destructive form of abstraction anchored by settler colonial ideologies of romantic anticapitalism. By engaging with capitalism's abstraction of differentiated gendered and racialized labor in order to create value, Day's project diverges from scholarship arguing that capitalism profits from labor via the production, rather than the abstraction, of racialized difference (Lowe 1996; Roediger 2008). Her book engages a rich multimedia archive and uses principal historical instances of Asian North American cultural production as theoretical texts to examine key racial policies since the 19th century: Chinese railroad labor in the 1880s, anti-Asian immigration restrictions; internment of Japanese civilians during World War II, and the neoliberalization of immigration policy in the late 1960s.

She begins her book with the moment when a "Caucasian-looking woman" replaced an Asian woman as scientist on the Canadian one-hundred-dollar bill and she ends with the "Iron Chink," a moment when a machine replaced 30 Chinese laborers in the Pacific Northwest salmon canneries. While the narrative moment describing the one-hundred-dollar bill highlights the abstraction of Asians as money commodity and the narrative moment discussing the "Iron Chink" highlights the abstraction of Asians as machine commodity, both moments function as racial signifiers. These different signifiers demonstrate the dialectical nature of concrete and abstract labor and also produce Asians as a destructive, abstract form of capital. The replacement, disposability, and rejection of the Asian figure in both of these objects illustrate Day's argument that the "Asian subject

in North America personifies abstract processes of value formation anchored by labor” (8). The racial, gendered, and qualitatively distinct characteristics of labor become obscured and abstracted as an expression of value. More specifically, Asian North American labor practices are aligned with values of cheapness and efficiency, forms of cultural production that amplify how Asians are perceived as “abstract labor.”

In the introduction, Day provides a helpful overview of romantic anticapitalism through a reading of Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism and also maps out a triangulation of Native, alien, and settler positions as a way to articulate settler colonial processes of racialization as constituted by land and labor. Romantic anticapitalism reveres the concrete realm of “dusty workbooks by the door, the reliable pickup truck in the driveway” while casting the abstract realm of “capital accumulation, surplus-value, and money” as a harmful, dominating force of capitalism. This false distinction between capital accumulation and labor as a lived practice demonstrates a misunderstanding that the seemingly abstract nature of value is objectified within the concrete form of the commodity (10). Romantic anticapitalism, as dominant settler colonial ideology, reinforces the triangulation Native, alien, and settler positions through the misperception of capitalism as this opposition between a “concrete natural world and a destructively abstract, value-driven one” (16).

The racial interplay of settler colonial exclusion and elimination undergirds Day’s analysis of Asian North America and the personification of capitalism. In reviewing literature on theories of settler colonialism and Asian racialization, Day categorically constitutes a transnational framework of racialization that is grounded in settler colonial logics and also includes nonwhite migration and involuntary contexts of migration. Her triangulation of Native, alien, and settler places the highly differentiated populations of African slaves and Asian migrants under the category of “alien.” She writes: “For slaves and racialized migrants, the degree of forced or voluntary migration or level of complicity with the settler state is ultimately secondary to their subordination under a settler colonial mode of production driven by the proprietorial logics of whiteness” (24).

In this sense, Day extends the complicity of the “alien” position within the settler colonial regime. While aliens may eventually inherit the settler sense of sovereign territorial rights, they also become subjected to the settler state’s logics of exclusion and elimination that reinforce and protect settler control. Under settler colonialism, Native populations are subjected to logics of elimination in order to ensure settler control over land. In the case of Black slaves, settlers sought to increase the property value of this perceived exclusive labor force and managed slave labor through a violent calculus of containment and exclusion. As migrants, Asians’ primary relationship to settler colonialism was also based on their labor, transforming Indigenous land into white property and capital. Yet, Asians were seen as a disposable, impermanent form of labor that could be both excluded and eliminated from the nation-state through mechanisms such as immigration policies that deterred entry, naturalization, voting, property ownership, etc.

Each chapter explores the negative abstraction of Asians under the settler colonial ideology of romantic anticapitalism. In the first chapter, Day begins her discussion of racialized labor as money with a caricature sketch of a Chinese laborer on the back of telegram. She subsequently engages Richard Fung’s documentary *Dirty Laundry: A History of Heroes* alongside Maxine Hong Kingston’s memoir *China Men* to look at recurring themes of substitutions that expose racial, sexual, and gender differences as degraded supplements within white settler colonialism. For example, Kingston’s text presents a moment at a ceremony where a white man drives in the final, commemorative spike after Chinese workers complete the railroad and Fung’s film uses character substitutions to comment on the Chinese body as an abstract object where racial and

sexual discourse become projected. By experimenting with nonlinear, or “perverse” temporalities (58) through acts of substitution, these cultural texts in the first chapter (the documentary and memoir) offer a response to the telegram, demonstrating how the abstraction of Asian alien labor becomes established through transgressions against time’s normalizing functions.

Her second chapter looks at landscape photography by artists Jin-me Yoon and Tseng Kwong Chi, exposing how romantic anticapitalism thrived during the peak of anti-Asian immigration restrictions by projecting settler identification with personified, Indigenous landscapes and rendering Native-ness as a biologized expression of concrete value. Here, she makes an interesting observation of landscape as symbols of national identity (ex: Canada’s Banff National Park evokes Canada’s nationalist identity with the North) and how eugenic ideology created analogies between wilderness protection and white racial preservation. For example, Tseng Kwong Chi’s staged photos feature himself in racialized excess, in “Chinese drag,” and his alien body degrades and intrudes upon the ‘natural’ landscape.

Following her argument on how abstract capital becomes racialized as Asian, her third chapter focuses on the resignification of Japanese labor as ideal, efficient, and compliant during the period of internment. Day contextualizes the exclusion, internment, and relocation of Japanese Americans and Canadians by discussing the abstraction of Japanese agriculture and fishing labor as a dehumanizing symbol of technological modernization. The association of Japanese labor with excessive industry fed a misperception of their control over the creation of relative surplus-value, the unnatural “value produced above and beyond surplus value” (130). Yet, the process of land dispossession and coerced labor under internment associated Japanese labor with a “romanticized noneconomism” of Indigeneity, which transformed Japanese labor into a dependent surplus labor force (123; 149). In addressing the idealization of Indigeneity as seemingly outside of capitalism, alongside settler colonialism’s trajectory of colonial elimination through assimilation, Day uses Joy Kogawa’s novel *Obasan* and Rea Tajiri’s video *History and Memory* to discuss this labor resignification—the mutation of Japanese labor into an ideal labor force—as a way to understand the logics of and relationship between settler colonialism and romantic anticapitalism. Finally, her fourth chapter looks at multimedia artist Ken Lum’s work and Karen Tei Yamashita’s novel *Tropic of Orange* to examine the aesthetics of reconfiguring borders as an apparatus of neoliberal multiculturalism (Melamed 2006), a logic of inclusion that deploys multiculturalism as a response to economic imperatives (167). Using cultural diversity and border-crossing as a means to facilitate investment and trade, the neoliberalization of borders substitutes economic class for race and continues to preserve racialized abstractions that surround multiple tiers of classed labor, while also bifurcating the economism of Asian racialization into high-tech, flexible labor, and working-class labor (155). Settler colonial capitalism becomes fulfilled through the migrant labor system (189).

Of her project, Day writes that she strives to construct a flexible, rather than ethnically determined model, that can be expanded and adapted to different historical circumstances of Asian populations that are not extensively covered in her book (35). As her work invites new conversations about the entwinements of Asian racialization, settler colonialism, and racial capitalism, I would also be interested in future work across different fields that take up Day’s category of “alien” positions and theory of abstract economism to more fully and carefully engage the differentiated legal, historical, social, and political contexts between the many and varied populations rendered “alien” in Day’s account. For example, how might other scholars take up this work to more capaciously engage with Blackness as well as with migration from Latin America? Additionally, how

might one apply Day's theoretical intervention to empirical fields and methods of research and scholarship?

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Rachel Kuo is a doctoral student in Media, Culture, and Communications at New York University studying at the convergence of critical race and digital studies. Centering the perspective of queer, feminist of color organizing, her research focuses on solidarity within and across communities of color by examining the politics and aesthetics of online social movements. More broadly, her framework locates inequality transnationally as articulated through gender, sexuality, class and nation. She teaches courses on technology and society, race and media, and also global media. Her work has been published in *New Media and Society*, and she occasionally writes online at Everyday Feminism.



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